

Fer-managh HERALD

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Minister sets up inquiry into three child deaths

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Parents of two of the three children into whose deaths, from hyponatraemia, the Health Minister, Angela Smith commissioned an independent inquiry, which will be held in public, have taken issue with the involvement of her Department in the inquiry team.

The inquiry will be chaired by John O'Hara, QC who, at last week's media briefing in Belfast met the parents of Lucy Crawford, Adam Strain and Raychel Ferguson.

Marie Ferguson said that she was unhappy that two staff members from the Department of Health had been appointed to the inquiry and she called on Mr O'Hara to remove them. Jay Slavin, the guardian of Adam Strain, insisted that legal representatives acting for the next-of-kin should be able to question witnesses.

Concerns

The Minister is due to meet with the parents this week to hear their concerns but, speaking on Monday night's 'The Issue' programme, she insisted that no one, including from within her own Department, would be exempt from being called to give evidence to the inquiry.

Her inquiry now brings to three the number of inquiries arising from the 'Insight' programme, which claimed that the deaths of all three children could have been avoided (wrong fluids at too high a dosage) and further alleged a cover-up in respect of Lucy Crawford.

Dr Jarleth O'Donohue, who had overall charge of Lucy's treatment, has been summoned to appear before the General Medical Council.

It has promised to report within eight months of last September's announcement of a hearing, which means that its Report should be available to the O'Hara inquiry, whose own Report has been promised by next June. Then, there is the police enquiry, which - as Mr O'Hara admitted this week - could restrict a witness from testifying to his inquiry for fear of incriminating himself / herself prior to the PSNI inquiry.

In any event, the Minister set out her stall last Thursday when she announced the terms of reference for the O'Hara inquiry into the deaths of the three children.

She insisted that the terms of reference she had set for the inquiry, together with the powers available to Mr O'Hara were, 'wide-ranging and should ensure that the enquiry deals with all the issues of concern'.

The Minister then spelt out the areas that she wanted the inquiry to look at:

✂ The care and treatment of Adam Strain, Lucy Crawford and Raychel Ferguson, especially in relation to the management of fluid balance and the

choice and administration of intravenous fluids in each case.

¥ The actions of the statutory authorities, other organisations and responsible individuals concerned in the procedures, investigations and events, which followed the deaths.

¥ The communications with, and explanations given to, the respective families and others by the relevant authorities.

Arrangements

She stated that the detailed arrangements for the conduct of the inquiry would be a matter for Mr O'Hara who, she stressed, would have the power to require any person to attend and give evidence to and to furnish information to any matter in question at the inquiry.

She commented: "I have every confidence that Mr O'Hara will conduct a thorough and rigorous inquiry and that he will establish what happened in these tragic cases."

Mr O'Hara has been tasked to have his Report on the desk of the Health Minister by 1st June next year, 'or such other date as may be agreed with the Department'. He has also been given the scope to examine and report on any other relevant matters that arise in connection with the inquiry.

This week, Mr O'Hara said that he would firstly gather together all the documentary evidence arising from the treatments of the three children and their deaths, including Coroners' reports. He would then decide where to go once he had done that.

Locally, interest will be focused on the Lucy Crawford case. She was admitted to the Children's Ward of the Erne hospital on 12th April, 2000, at 7.20pm. A drip was inserted at 10.30pm but Lucy's condition worsened and she was placed in the hospital's intensive care unit at 3.35am the next morning.

Within two hours, she had been transferred to the Royal Hospital For Sick Children, Dr O'Donohue and a nurse travelling with her in the ambulance. On Friday, 14th April, Lucy's ventilator was switched off. Earlier this year, the Chief Medical Officer with the Department of Health, Dr Henrietta Campbell attributed the deaths to, 'an abnormal reaction in certain children'.

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